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SUBJECT: CHILEAN OPPOSITION EMBRACES THE FOREST, BUT WANTS
DIFFERENT TREES

REF: A. A) SANTIAGO 2291
 1B. B) SANTIAGO 2228

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Kelly for reasons 1.5 (d and b).

Summary

11. (C) Likely 2009 rightist presidential candidate Pablo Longuiera recognizes that in a country where consensus on major issues reigns across the political spectrum, the opposition faces a difficult task in seeking to regain power.

The task is made all the harder because Chile is "profoundly leftist" and the governing Concertacion coalition begins any election race with an assumed 10 point lead amongst likely voters. Absent a global "economic crisis" which affects Chile, the Bachelet administration will also continue to benefit from full coffers, allowing it to address social problems, thus solidifying its electoral advantage.

Longuiera believes the opposition will have to focus on the specific details of given programs if it is to put space between itself and the government. Longuiera also hopes to use burgeoning allegations of corruption, which threaten to open a breach within Concertacion, to gain political traction for the opposition. End summary.

12. (U) E/POL Counselor December 18 called on Senator Pablo Longuiera of the Independent Democratic Union (UDI) party. Longuiera, a past president of the UDI, is a leading light within the Alianza, the loose coalition of the UDI and Renovacion Nacional (RN) (the more moderate center-right wing of the opposition). Longuiera is widely considered, along with the RN's Sebastian Pinera (who lost the 2005 run-off election to President Bachelet), to be the opposition candidates in the 2009 presidential elections.

Tough Road to Hoe

13. (C) "Chile is a country built on consensus," Longuiera observed, with agreement across the board on the major issues and problems Chileans face. Increased spending on education, reform of the pension system, and attracting investment are all priorities on which the governing coalition and opposition saw eye-to-eye. When E/POL Counselor remarked that this made it difficult for an opposition candidate to argue for a change in power, Longuiera nodded, adding that on top of that, Chile was "profoundly leftist." "The Concertacion can count on a solid electoral base of between 40 and 45 percent. We, on the other hand, have only 30-35 percent assured." To make matters even more difficult, Longuiera continued, the Concertacion currently has all the

cards in its favor. The economy is strong. The price of copper remains high, providing the government the funds it needs to address social concerns. And, he added, Chile is engaged in the region and the world.

¶4. (C) As to what might change the political landscape, Longuiera posited several possibilities. The first was a dramatic decline in global economic growth which affected Chile, an option beyond opposition control, and one that wasn't desirable. The opposition could also introduce alternative measures to government proposals. However, such detail - "focusing on changing the trees, even while embracing the forest" - would be difficult and unglamorous work. A third option was to hammer the government on the recent string of corruption allegations (reftel A). Longuiera said that the allegations were serious and well-founded (without offering any more information). Moreover, the charges are forcing open fissures between ruling coalition partners, as well as within individual party structures. The opposition could defeat a weakened, distracted, and divided Concertacion.

A Unified Opposition?

¶5. (C) E/POL Counselor noted that press reports and private comments suggested that UDI and RN continued to be riven by internal dissent, especially between Longuiera and Pinera (reftel B). Could those divisions be overcome by 2009? Longuiera replied that he had just had lunch that day with Pinera. Much of the supposed bad blood between them was an "invention of the leftist press." Nonetheless, the differences they did have were negotiable. In 2009, UDI and RN would again run separate first-round campaigns. Longuiera was adamant that on the right it would "be between Pinera and me," dismissing out of hand the announced UDI candidacies of Joaquin Lavin and Jacqueline Van Rysselberghe. The Alianza parties will unite behind the top right wing vote-getter, "whoever it is."

6.(C) Longuiera suggested that the Concertacion would also run two candidates, unlike 2005, when the Christian Democrats' (DC) Soledad Alvear stepped down in favor of the Socialist's (PS) Michelle Bachelet. The DC has been hemorrhaging votes and deputies over the past two elections. It needs to have a prominent candidate heading its ticket in 2009, in order to stem its losses - including losing its place as the single largest party in the Parliament. Unlike the right, which would remain united into the second round, a divided left could continue to fracture, with some DC voters drifting to the right in the second round.

¶7. (C) Asked if the recent death of Pinochet - and the deep divisions within society it had revealed - would influence the 2009 elections, Longuiera replied emphatically that it would not. Pinochet will "fade with time into history, and Chileans will look to the future."

Comment

¶8. (C) Longuiera is the candidate of Chile's far(ther) right - and of those who still hold a place in their hearts for Pinochet. Indeed, he made a brief appearance at Pinochet's funeral -- unlike Pinera, who stayed away. Were he to win a place in the second round, it would be difficult for him to draw voters from the moderate DC. He is a pragmatist, however, noting candidly the difficulties a rightist candidate faces in a country now accustomed to center-left rule and, moreover, one that is progressing quite nicely in many respects. Pegging the opposition's hopes on the corruption scandals is one option. But with Bachelet's government moving to address the problem, one that may have materialized too soon to benefit the opposition in 2009. End comment.

KELLY